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SUBJECT: HONDURAS MERIDA LOA SIGNING IS BIG EVENT

REFS: A) STATE 1702

B) 07 TEGUCIGALPA 1820

¶1. Summary: Honduran Minister of Security COL Jorge Rodas Gamero and Ambassador Llorens signed the first Merida Letter of Agreement in the region on January 9 amidst more fanfare than previous LOAs have ever received. President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya participated in the event and made certain to shine a public light on the joint USG-GOH effort to tackle one of the top public concerns in Honduras. The event received heavy, positive press coverage and provides the Mission with an opportunity to create momentum on a variety of programs. End summary.

¶2. While past LOA signing ceremonies have been relatively low-key events held at the Ministry of Security, the President's participation gave this event top billing. In the ceremony the GOH brought out hundreds of families representing the community security roundtables that are part of their effort to improve relations between the police and the neighborhoods they patrol. Dozens of print, television and radio journalists attended, and the event received heavy coverage in all media. Following the signing ceremony, the dignitaries all inaugurated a nearby model police precinct.

¶3. In a speech, the Ambassador framed the event as the first installment in a broader, multi-year, inter-agency and multilateral effort to confront the common threats of criminal trafficking and transnational organized crime in the region. He highlighted the long-standing history of cooperation between the United States and Honduras, and that the Merida Initiative represented a strategic partnership between the United States, Mexico and the Central American countries. He then detailed some of the activities the LOA would support and how they tied into the overall effort to support security cooperation. The Ambassador closed by highlighting the importance of community involvement in the struggle against crime, noting that with all sides working together, the people of Honduras and the region would not have to be afraid of crime any more.

¶4. The President gave a positive speech that highlighted not only the long history of cooperative efforts between the USG and the GOH on security, but also pointed out key measures the GOH has taken to promote security. He described the role of the community security roundtables as a means for citizens to address their concerns directly to the police in their neighborhoods, noting that since inauguration of the program in 2007, over 13,000 such gatherings have been convened, involving over 40,000 individuals nationwide. He noted that his administration has met its 2005 promise to double the number of police, sending more trainees through the police academy in the past four years than had been trained in all previous years combined. (Note: The GOH has doubled the police force from 7,000 in 2005 to over 14,000 by the end of 2008. End note.) He then stressed that the prosecutors needed to cooperate more with the police to support their efforts to put away key organized crime figures. He bemoaned the fact that all too often, crime leaders are arrested multiple times, only to be back on the streets because they are never convicted.

¶5. Rodas in his own speech said the Merida Initiative fits in with the 2007 GOH strategic security plan (Ref B). He hoped the ceremony would help counter the public perception that security is strictly a police responsibility. Rodas added that the November 2008 political primary campaigns had politicized the crime issue and distorted further the public view of security in the country. (Note: Rodas has stressed both in public and private to Emboffs that while crime rates are still unacceptably high, the key indices of murder and kidnappings have come down in the past two years. End note.)

¶6. Comment: The LOA signing ceremony received the level of positive public attention both the GOH and USG need to jump-start the Merida Initiative as a means to coordinate all our security efforts. The increased attention will also enable the Mission to encourage key GOH contacts to resolve some long-standing law enforcement obstacles, such as the GOH seized asset program, slow-moving prosecutions and low conviction rates. We should continue to ride the wave of press attention to keep the spotlight aimed at these efforts and insist on follow-through from the GOH. End comment.

LLORENS